

I have to say, in thirteen years of ministry, I have written a lot of sermons about a lot of things, but today...today is a first...and I wholeheartedly blame the Bible study crew, one of them in particular, who shall go unnamed—Misty. So here we are my beloved siblings in Christ, a sermon about the Donner Party. I guarantee none of you except the Tuesday morning bunch saw that coming.

So, the year is 1846, and for all of my millennials, it is time to ford the river along the Oregon Trail. The country is pushing a strong agenda of western expansion to get more settlers into California and Oregon, and so despite the dangers such a journey would entail people are heading west in droves. That spring, a convoy of 500 wagons left Independence, Missouri with their eyes on the Pacific, and at the back of that wagon train are the 32 members of the Donner and Reed families, plus some of their employees. To condense a lot of history down, the pathway West had a lot of different options and explorers and capitalists were always encouraging pioneers to one road or another. One such man was Lansford Hastings, who wanted folks to travel through his newly discovered Hastings Pass which took them around the Great Salt Lake onward to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There was a lot of misinformation and chaos along the way, but suffice it to say, the Donner-Reed crew decided to take this pass.

As they pushed their way to the Sierra Nevada's they faced a decision. It is now the fall of 1846. Do they push through the mountains or wait for fear of early snowfalls? Tradition held that the mountains wouldn't be snowbound until November, so on they went and of course, what followed was *a lot* of snow. They end up completely snowed in in the middle of the mountains with very few supplies. A wide variety of rescue missions were executed, there were attempts to get them supplies, but they were good and stuck until the snow melted.

Now this is of course where things get icky and horror movie adjacent. When faced with dwindling supplies, malnutrition, and very few options, desperation takes over and suddenly life becomes like a cartoon where your neighbor starts looking like Thanksgiving dinner. The details of the ick are irrelevant, but what isn't is that beyond the rescue missions there were others who tried to offer the Donners help. Groups of indigenous peoples who were used to life in these harsh conditions attempted to offer resources and help on multiple occasions, only to be refused each and every time. At one point, so adamant were the Donners to not accept help from these groups that gunfire ensued and one of those offering help was killed. Sit with that for a second. Faced with starvation, frostbite, and death, the

Donner Party chose cannibalism over the help of indigenous peoples. And then dared to kill them when they just tried to help.

You can, hopefully, see where it's not a massive jump from the, now named, Donner Pass to the Jericho Road, because as Jesus shows us, a parable can be found in pretty much anything. You have to wonder if Jesus knew this was a setup from the jump, and I'm guessing he does, because he doesn't pull any punches when it comes to the question he gets asked. What must I do to inherit eternal life? A fairly expected question with a fairly expected answer. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, AND your neighbor as yourself. But our questioner pushes a little bit, *who is my neighbor?* He's either trying to puff himself up to confirm he's done the right thing, he's trying to box Jesus into a corner, or he's genuinely curious. I'm guessing though that he isn't prepared for Jesus' answer.

While the story is just that, a story, the elements of it would have sounded familiar to Jesus' audience. The road down from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for its danger. It was filled with blind corners and sharp turns, places where robbers could camp out and attack those who are coming back down from the big city to their homes. It was well known that you shouldn't travel this road alone, so Jesus' audience would have known

right off the bat that nothing good is going to happen here. Jesus tells the story of a traveler experiencing the worst this road has to offer, robbed, beaten, stripped of all his possessions, and left to die. The audience had to have been cringing but also kind of shaking their heads like, yup, that is what can happen. But then the story changes. Help seems to appear. If there is anyone who knows the mandate Jesus gave to the questioner at the beginning, it would be a priest or a Levite. You love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. So clearly, these two men would see a person in need and know that they would want to be cared for if the roles were reversed so certainly they will stop to help. It's what God calls them to! But...the move to the other side of the road.

We don't know their motivations. Fear that robbers were still in the area, fear that it was a ploy to get them attacked, fear that the man is dead and by touching him they would lose the ritual cleanliness they just received in Jerusalem. We don't know, all we know is that Jesus laid out the foundations of faith and then describes two people of God who exit left when given the opportunity to live that faith out. But then, a Samaritan comes on the scene and Jesus' audience would have gasped, shuddered, or made snide remarks under their breath, for nothing good comes from having a Samaritan around. And of course because this is Jesus, the Samaritan is

the one who lives out the faith calling, right? He doesn't just love his neighbor, he provides for him, he goes above and beyond what most people would do when seeing someone in this position. He treats his wounds, binds them, lifts him onto his own animal, slowing his own travel down and thus risking his own safety, takes him to an inn, and then pays for his care. It's unprecedented compassion, and the audience would not have been expecting it, nor appreciating it, as evidenced by the fact that when Jesus asks who was the neighbor, the questioner can't even *say* "the Samaritan," but only "the one who showed him mercy." That's the depth of animosity and angst that exists between Jews and Samaritans at this time, and here is Jesus just saying that a Samaritan can be the good guy! And that's where Jesus is frankly a genius because he weaves stories that force us to confront and challenge all our prejudices and all of our difficulties and all of the ways that we try to find loopholes in our faith to make it accommodate our needs.

As I've been pondering all of this this week, the Donner Party of it all, again sentences I never thought I would preach. It has forced me to ask a question that I don't usually ask of this parable. So often we look at this from an outsider lens, quietly critiquing those who didn't help, honoring those who did, but this week I have been wondering, what did the man who was helped think when he recovered? Was he grateful? Was he astounded?

Were his own prejudices challenged? Or was he angry? Would he have rathered he had the ability to refuse the help if he knew it was a Samaritan offering it to him? We want to look at that possibility and be like good grief no, because how could you be angry about having your life saved? But a lesson from history...cannibalism over help from indigenous peoples. And it forces us to confront the question, whose help would we refuse and what does that ask us to challenge when it comes to our faith and how we live in the world?

I think somewhere along the way in this world we have lost our sense of our common humanity. We see each other based upon the boxes we put each other in, rather than the baseline truth that there is not a single person you can meet that is not beloved by God, who is not wonderfully made by the same Creator that made you. We forget that, because frankly I think that we would rather live in our loophole world where “neighbor” is based on our definition and not on God’s. And honestly we want to cling to that sometimes to our own detriment. I think about the number of female doctors who don’t get patients because people don’t trust a female doctor. I think about the small businesses that suffer because they’re minority owned and thus ignored. I think about the people whose lives get ripped out from under them because of the color of their skin and thus the assumptions made about

their citizenship and ethnicity. What might this world look like if we dared to let go of our clutching our pearls instinct that surely a *Samaritan* can't offer help to me, and instead looked at the world and said my beloved sibling in Christ is offering me a hand in love? And let's be real, we want *others* to abide by that, but when it's our own feet held to the fire, we balk sometimes, even if we don't always want to admit it, but we all know that there is someone's help we would refuse if push came to shove and we were operating in our boxed in worldview.

I can't help but chuckle at the fact that the first lesson has God telling the Israelites that the law is *easy* to follow because they know what it is, and I'm just like whoa buddy, we have different definitions of easy, but the truth is, the word is easy, it's the execution of it that is difficult because our own flaws, foibles, prejudices, and sinfulness get in the way. At the end of the day, we're all just human, with air in our lungs, and difficulties along the way. Sometimes we're going to be the one stuck on the road or in the snowstorm, and sometimes we're going to be the one wondering if we should help, wondering if we're going to be rejected because of how we're seen. May we dare to decide that the word is easy, that we will love God with all that we've got, help when we can, be humble enough to accept help when it's offered, and dare to see the world as our neighbor. **AMEN!!!**